

Labour White Papers, No. 13

STRIKE-BREAKING ORGANISATIONS

LABOUR RESEARCH DEPARTMENT
162, Buckingham Palace Road
London, S.W.1

Price 1d.

LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Strike-breaking Organisations

THE open use of the armed forces in the suppression of strikes is a familiar feature both in this country and abroad, and both before and since the war. The purpose of this article is to study the growth in Britain of auxiliary strike-breaking organisations and their connection with the Government—a study which is of the gravest significance for the organised Labour movement at the present time.

The development referred to can be said to date from the spring of 1919—a period when the organised Labour movement, freed from the oppression of patriotic appeals for industrial peace during the war, was beginning to press forward demands which had been accumulating during the previous five years. At that time, too, the army was known to be discontented with the delay in demobilisation, and the Government was uncertain of what its attitude would be in the event of labour conflicts. As a first step, therefore, by various devices the Government secured the postponement of both the railway and the mining disputes, and began the organisation of a class defence force which could be relied on to help to defeat the workers when the clash came.

The facts were partially revealed by Lloyd George, speaking at the Mansion House on October 7th, 1919, just after the settlement of the railway strike. In February of that year, he stated, the Government had come to the conclusion that a railway strike was inevitable, and

had therefore begun to build up, under the Home Secretary, "a purely civilian organisation" to meet it. As was proved when the strike occurred, the Government had prepared an alternative transport organisation, depending partly on direct Government assistance and partly on the enrolment of "well-disposed citizens." These citizens came largely from the Automobile Association, the Middle Classes Union—which was founded in March, 1919, evidently under direct Government inspiration—and various other organisations of that type; while the Federation of British Industries instructed its officials—

to place themselves at once in touch with the Local authorities, the local transport officers, and other officials who are organising the transport of the country.

When the strike had actually begun, the Government issued instructions that out-of-work donation was not to be payable to anyone who refused to do transport work; and on October 4th, 1919, the Government asked Local Authorities to form "Citizen Guards" to co-operate in the maintenance of order.

Since that time the Government has been steadily developing its own direct strike-breaking organisation—this is proved by such recent instances as the circular to the Navy (exposed by Mr. Montague in the House of Commons); the grant of £40 in respect of cars registered for strike-breaking purposes; the formation of the Army Supplementary Reserve (Transportation Branch); and the proposed substitution of civilian trade unionists by the military in Government repair depots. At the same time it has been promoting,

through leading ex-Army, ex-Navy, and ex-Civil Service individuals, the development of "civilian" organisations which operate the Government schemes when required. The encouragement openly given to O.M.S. by Sir William Joynson-Hicks is therefore not an accident, but is merely carrying on the policy which was started by the Coalition Government in 1919 and has since been adhered to by successive Governments. We give in the following pages some particulars of the most prominent organisations which have been set up in accordance with that policy.

I. THE ORGANISATION FOR THE MAINTENANCE OF SUPPLIES

On September 25th, this body issued a statement to the Press which runs as follows :

For many months past it has been evident that a movement is being organised to take advantage of a trade dispute, exceptionally difficult to solve, in order to promote a general strike, and by suspending supplies and arresting power, transport, and sanitary services to paralyse the national life. . . .

It is then announced that the O.M.S. has been set up, with a description of its management and objects, and a statement that it is "strictly non-political and non-party in character."

This body is under the general direction of its Central Council, but local committees have already been formed in twenty-two of the Metropolitan boroughs, and are to be set up all over the country, if the necessary funds are forthcoming. It was stated that certain funds had been placed at the disposal of the Council by "a few patriotic citizens" but "generous financial support" was appealed

for to "enable its activities to be extended throughout the whole of the Kingdom."

Sir Rennell-Rodd, explaining the scheme, said that there were five categories in which volunteers were classified :

- A, for protecting the public services, and, if necessary, enrolling as special constables.
- B, for voluntary workers on the railways, tubes, trams, the handling of food stuffs, etc.
- C, for drivers of vans, lorries, etc.
- D, for messengers in the event of telephone and postal services being involved.
- E, clerical workers.

No uniform or badge is to be worn. Provision is to be made for co-operation with other bodies so as to prevent overlapping.

The President of this imposing-looking body is no less a person than Lord Hardinge of Penshurst, formerly Viceroy of India and Ambassador in Paris, and the following are members of its council :

Admiral of the Fleet, Lord Jellicoe.

Major-General Lord Scarbrough (Director-General Territorial and Volunteer Forces, 1917-1921).

Lord Ranfurly.

Lord Falkland.

Sir James Rennell-Rodd.

Admiral Sir Alexander Duff.

Lieutenant-General Sir Francis Lloyd.

Sir Lynden Macassey.

Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Martin Archer-Shee.

Colonel Sir Courtauld Thomson.

Dr. Walter Seton.

Mr. Geoffrey Drage.

The result of the appeal through the Press was

said to be a steady influx to the O.M.S., both of volunteers and of financial help, and Lord Hardinge professed himself to be satisfied with the response from "people of all classes," though he admitted that his organisation had had one failure—in a borough of East London! It is satisfactory to note that there is at any rate *one* borough in which scabs are unobtainable.

On October 1st a letter was published in *The Times* from Sir William Joynson-Hicks, the Home Secretary, giving his official benediction to the organisation in the following terms:

I have known of the inauguration of this body for many weeks past; in fact, the promoters consulted me as to their desire to form some such an organisation. . . . I told the promoters of the O.M.S. that there was no objection on the part of the Government to their desire to inaugurate the body to which you refer; that, if and when an emergency arose, the Government would discharge the responsibility which is theirs, and theirs alone, but that it would be a very great assistance to us to receive from the O.M.S., or from any other body of well-disposed citizens, classified lists of men in different parts of the country who would be willing to place their services at the disposal of the Government. . . .

2. THE NATIONAL CITIZEN'S UNION

The N.C.U. (formerly the Middle Classes Union), which has recently stated that it is working with the O.M.S., is not appearing for the first time as a blackleg organisation. At its Annual Conference in 1923, Colonel Pretymann Newman, M.P., stated that the Union was out to maintain the national services of the country, and boasted that its Liverpool branch was at the time of the dock strike organising "with a view to carrying on should the

necessity arise." Lady Askwith, Chairman of the London Council of this body, states in a letter to *The Times*, that the N.C.U. registered its members to support the Government in the 1921 coal strike, and was thanked by the Government for its substantial help; also that the same members have now registered again for similar work in connection with the O.M.S.

Its record when it was called the Middle Classes Union, included :

The provision of several thousand volunteers during the railway strike of October, 1919; the provision of 500 volunteers "to maintain essential services" during a strike at Southampton in May, 1920;

—besides participating in a number of local disputes.

3. THE BRITISH EMPIRE UNION

The British Empire Union, which was founded in 1915, and carried on a vigorous anti-alien campaign during the war years, first began to interfere in industrial matters in the latter part of 1919, and in January, 1920, it set up a so-called "Industrial Peace Department," which carries on campaigns against "the dangers of revolution and communism, etc."

The income of the B.E.U. for 1924 was £11,792, but its officials complain that this is quite insufficient. This large yearly sum cannot come solely from small subscriptions, and in this connection it is interesting to study the names of the officials of this body, the members of its Board of Management, and the list of firms which it gives as its supporters. The President is Lord Danesport, formerly Sir John Butcher, M.P., and now director

of the Equity and Law Life Assurance Society, and of the Grand Junction Canal Co. Ltd. Sir Edward Iliffe, M.P., director of Allied Newspapers Ltd.; Iliffe and Sons Ltd., the *Midland Daily Telegraph*, and various other newspapers and printing firms, is its Treasurer. Directors of other well-known firms figure on the Board of Management, and among the list of prominent business firms given as supporters of the B.E.U., appear eight large brewers or distillers, five engineering firms, and three colliery companies. Other branches of trade, banking, insurance, etc., are well represented. We can well understand that the B.E.U. may regard strike-breaking as a not unprofitable activity for its members.

The Union's policy is, on its own statement, *absolutely non-party*, but it has publicly announced its intention of co-operating with the O.M.S., and is enrolling volunteers for this purpose.

4. THE BRITISH FASCISTS

Fascism, whether Italian or British, has always, and with good cause, been looked upon with suspicion by trade unionists. Several attempts have been made in Britain to start Fascist movements, but the body with which we are dealing is, as far as can be ascertained, the most widespread and has the largest following.

This is a body particulars of which were first published in August, 1923, and which took up its abode at 71, Elm Park Gardens, South Kensington, formerly the office of *The Patriot*, the Duke of Northumberland's organ. In its first circular this organisation described itself as having been formed "to render practical, and, if necessary, militant defence of His Majesty the King and the Empire."

In their revised circular, which is now being sent to potential members, the British Fascists describe themselves as being organised in two branches—men's units and women's units. The circular states :

In times of peace both branches carry on propaganda, recruiting, and counter-revolutionary organisation. Should revolution, or a general strike be threatened, men's units would form the active force, and the women's units the auxiliary force.

We are then told of the various sub-divisions of these forces, each of which are under "selected Commanders, who must hold warrants," which apparently may be cancelled without reason given by the Executive Committee. As to what exactly the Active and Auxiliary Forces would do in the event of a general strike, the circular is discreetly silent. We are told, however, that it is not a strike-breaking organisation ; " but, in the event of a General Strike designed to paralyse the country, it will most certainly co-operate whole-heartedly with the Authorities in the direction of safeguarding the food supply, and of assisting to maintain vital services." A further clause in the circular is as follows : " The supreme control of both men's and women's units, as well as of finance, is vested in the Council, which has been registered as a company, known as the British Fascisti Ltd. This has ensured the recognition of its objects by the Government." The circular is signed by the President, Brig.-General R. B. D. Blakeney (General Manager Egyptian State Railways, 1923). The Commander for the London area is Brigadier-General Sir Ormonde de l'Epee Winter, K.B.E., and the Vice-President is Rear-Admiral J. C. Armstrong.

The British Fascists have been very much in the limelight recently owing to projects in Liverpool and Wolverhampton to enrol the local Fascists *en masse* in the special constabulary. In both cases the Chief Constable of the district accepted the offer of the Fascist Commanders to enrol their men, and an amazing letter from the Chief Constable of Wolverhampton to Major St. John Richards of the South Staffordshire Fascists, was published showing that plans were made to enrol the Fascists in bands of fifty under the control of their own officers, and to parade them with the Regular Force, headed by the Police Band. A considerable amount of public attention was attracted to this scheme. As a result of protest, the plans were abandoned *for the moment*.

At Wolverhampton the Fascists who presented themselves were told by the police that before their applications could be considered they must resign from their organisation; and at Liverpool the Chief Constable decided that "as the result of the protests which have been made since the proposal was made public nothing further shall be done for the moment." The proposal at Liverpool had been to enrol 2,000 to 3,000 Fascists, which would have entirely swamped the Special Constabulary, the members of which at present number only two or three hundred. There is some evidence, however, that the Home Office intends to increase the numbers of Special Constabulary in the near future; publicity has been given to the fact that the Monmouthshire County Council, for instance, was asked permission by the Chief Constable to order 100 uniforms for Special Constables, *for use next year*.

5. THE NATIONAL GUARD

The National Guard, which has its headquarters at 27, Fitzroy Street, London, is apparently a rival organisation to the O.M.S., and although it first appeared in the Press early in October its officials stated that it had been in existence for three months.

Its circular begins with the statement :

“ The National Guard is an organisation formed for the enrolment of all loyal subjects.”

Its objects include :

“ To assist the Civil Authorities in the enforcement of Law and Order, and in maintaining the essential public services.

“ To oppose vigorously (by force if necessary), attempts by any section of the community to paralyse any industry of the country which is necessary to the existence, comfort, and health of the people.”

Colonel Fitzjohn, one of the founders of this organisation, explained to the Press that for some time past he and several other officers had been considering how they could get together a body of men who would be in a position *to take over the control of the railways and power stations* in an emergency. It had now been proposed to get together a force of A class men to assist the civil authority if the military or naval forces were called up. He also made the following significant statement :

“ In the event of any dislocation or disturbance of any essential service we shall simply offer to the Government the necessary men to carry on the work that is held up, but if the Government stand by and take no action, and do not ask for volunteers, then we shall be prepared to provide men to give assistance.

He also stated that in the event of a mining dispute the National Guard would be prepared to instal men for pumping operations to prevent the destruction of property.

6. ARMY SUPPLEMENTARY RESERVE, TRANSPORTATION BRANCH

Early in January, 1925, the railway companies addressed a circular to their employees inviting them to join the transportation branch of the Army Supplementary Reserve; similar steps were taken by the L.G.O.C., and recruiting forms were also sent to dockers. The arrangement between the War Office and the railway companies provided that the railway general managers should nominate the commanding officers and select the men who would be directed to go to the recruiting offices. These recruits would be liable to serve in any part of the world on mobilisation, and to be called out by Proclamation, and would also be legally liable to be called out in aid of the civil power. The formation of the Supplementary Reserve was authorised in August, 1924, and the Royal Warrant establishing it was signed by Mr. Stephen Walsh, Secretary for War in the Labour Government. The argument used by the supporters of the scheme was that the liability to be called out in aid of the Civil Power would not be enforced; but, on the other hand, it was pointed out that experience showed that statements of this sort are easily disregarded under the plea of "national emergency." As the *Manchester Guardian* rather naively put it:

The distinction between organising essential services and strike-breaking is not so clear to trade unionists as it is to the rest of us, and they may not unnaturally have their doubts as to what would con

stitute a state of emergency in the eyes of a " capitalist government " and what use they might make of it.

Naturally the whole question raised a ferment in railway and transport union circles, and many branches of the N.U.R. and other unions passed resolutions demanding the withdrawal of the Army Order and appealing to all trade unionists to refuse to join the Reserve. The unions found that the Government was not prepared to give any satisfactory guarantee that the reserve would not be used for strike-breaking, with the result that the N.U.R., the A.S.L.E. and F., and the T. and G.W.U., with the support of the T.U.C., warned their members against enlistment. Very little has appeared in the Press about the matter since last March, but certain railway men must have succumbed to the temptations held out in the form of extra holidays and other concessions, as it was reported in July that the annual training of category B of the Army Supplementary Reserve was beginning, and 200 platelayers, recruited from all over the L.N.E.R. system, went into camp at Longmoor. It is difficult to discover how many trade unionists have joined the Supplementary Reserve, but it is a matter which needs careful watching by the Unions.

Thus we find a series of organisations, some directly set up by the Government and others welcomed by the Government in times of strikes, all directed towards the suppression of any organised resistance by Labour against the policy of wage cuts all round, which has been clearly laid down by Baldwin as the official policy of the Government.

Whether openly recognised or not, these bodies are all part of the Government machine. A leading article in *The Times* of October 1st, 1919, stated the position quite frankly. "Labour Volunteers," it argued, were necessary, to form a civil voluntary army "for the specific object of defeating attempts by organised Labour to hold the State to ransom." But "it would certainly be preferable" for this army "to be organised by private association."

In other words, in order to throw dust in the eyes of organised Labour, these various "private associations" have been set up, for the most part without the official blessing of the Government, but all with as clear a part to play in the breaking of a strike by the Government as the police and military forces. Faced with the certainty of an Industrial Alliance of the workers' organisations, the Government postponed the mining crisis in July, and is meanwhile rushing ahead with the promotion and co-ordination of the strike-breaking organisations which, with the assistance of the armed forces, are expected to be able to push one stage further the capitalist oppression of the British working class.

(Further copies of this pamphlet can be obtained at 9d. per dozen, 2/9 per 50, post free, from the Labour Research Dept., 162, Buckingham Palace Road, S.W.1)

Labour Research Department

The Labour Research Department exists to be of service to every worker and every workers' organisation. Its work is intended to satisfy the urgent needs of active fighters in the Labour Movement.

It is ready to answer inquiries from any member or affiliated society on questions of interest to Labour.

The Labour Research Department urges you to affiliate.

A large part of its work—the Monthly Circular, answers to inquiries, etc.—has to be reserved for members or affiliated societies. Its general publications, which the working-class movement needs, can continue only if Labour organisations support the Department.

All Trades Councils, Labour Parties, Trade Union branches, and other recognised Labour bodies are eligible to affiliate. All members of such bodies are eligible for membership of the Department.

Members pay a minimum annual subscription of 10s. 6d. ; affiliated societies a minimum of £1.

Get your organisation to affiliate.

Write to the Secretary—

**LABOUR RESEARCH DEPARTMENT
162, Buckingham Palace Road, S.W.1**